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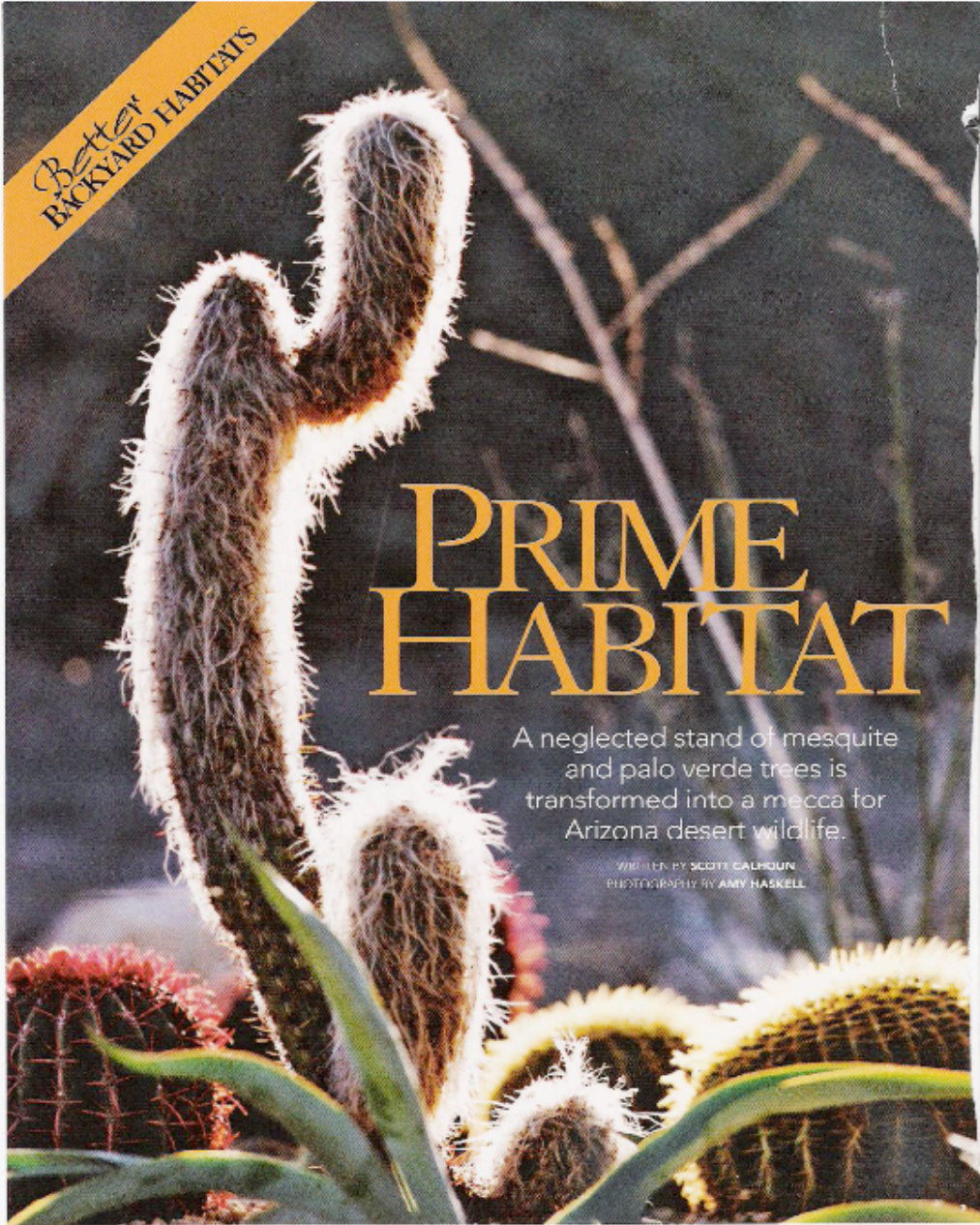
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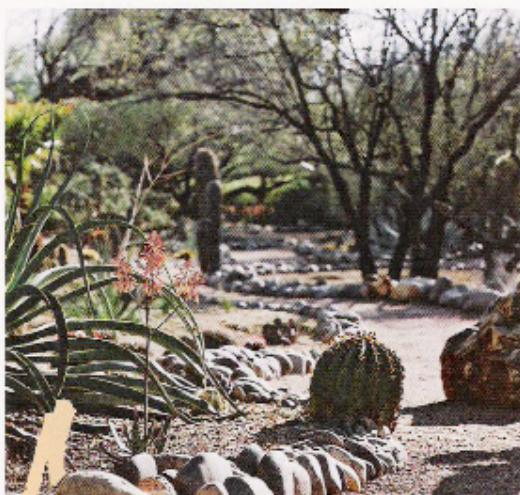
Better
BACKYARD HABITATS

PRIME HABITAT

A neglected stand of mesquite
and palo verde trees is
transformed into a mecca for
Arizona desert wildlife.

WRITTEN BY SCOTT CALHOUN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY HASKELL





Like a hidden canyon oasis, Hope Dillon's garden is tucked into a little valley just below the craggy western slope of the Santa Catalina Mountains in northwest Arizona. Bordered by the Canada Del Oro wash, a wide and usually dry river bed, on one side and a Tucson golf course on the other, Hope's Zone 9 yard has long been a refuge for wildlife.

For many years her thicket of native mesquite and palo verde trees was impenetrable for humans, and even some animals. With the help of a skilled gardener, Greg Corman of Gardening Insights, a Tucson garden design firm, Hope turned her yard into a haven for people and wildlife. She hired Corman, a designer and horticulturist, in 2003 to rehabilitate and refresh her garden. "I give the credit to Greg," Hope says. "He made the garden what it is today."

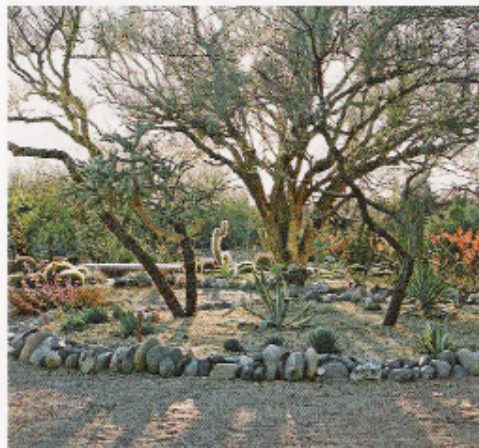
Corman was thrilled to work with Hope, a former docent at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, partly because of her love for the wildlife in her garden. "She wasn't afraid of snakes," Corman says, "and that is important here because we have six species living in the garden." He listed several: a Texas blind snake, a gopher snake, a Sonoran king snake, and, of course, the western diamondback rattlesnake.

ABOVE:

Fishhook barrel cacti (*Ferocactus wislizeni*) and Agave line the winding paths of Hope Dillon's Arizona garden.

LEFT:

The sculptural shapes of columnar and barrel cacti are especially effective elements in the landscape when lit from behind.



ABOVE: Multitrunked trees like palo verde (*Ferkinsonia florida*) and mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) cast dappled shade that's perfect for growing succulents. **THIS PHOTO:** The rugged Western slope of the Santa Catalina Mountains serve as a grand backdrop to the garden.

One of Corman's first tasks was to tame the neglected mesquite and palo verde trees that were riddled with dead and crossing branches. Corman put some of the resulting debris to innovative use: "We built a rustic shade ramada in the middle of the garden—like an African hut—but made from local materials, and on top we made a roof of piled brush," he says. In addition to being a terrific centerpiece and a recycling triumph, the ramada is a quail magnet.

"When I arrive at the garden in the morning, whole coveys are milling around up there," Corman says. "It turns out that dense brush, raised off the ground and therefore out of reach of predators, is ideal quail roosting habitat."



Hope Dillon



The garden's central pathway stretches about 300 feet through the carefully pruned desert trees that are home to a levy of birds. When walking down the informal alley of blue palo verde (*Parinsonia florida*), it is common to spy Vermilion Flycatchers swooping from one tree branch to another, nearly touching the ground midflight. Two of the most beloved wild residents of Hope's garden are a mating pair of Cooper's Hawks that make the yard their full-time home. Hummingbirds visit the flower spikes of firecracker penstemon (*Penstemon catorii*), a double-duty perennial whose ripe seeds become food for quail.

BELOW: Geology plays an integral role in garden design of the arid West. Massive pieces of local rock and gemstones comprise Hope's medicine wheel.

The fishhook barrel cacti in the yard provide food for curved-bill thrashers and kangaroo rats that dissect the pink, pile-shape fruits while searching for seeds. In addition, the three predominant species of barrel cactus in Hope's garden—the fishhook barrel (*Ferocactus wrightii*), golden barrel (*Echinocactus grusonii*), and fire

barrel (*Ferocactus pringlei*)—provide design continuity throughout the garden landscape. "The mass plantings of barrel cactus are the main organizing theme of the garden," Corman says. "Their color, texture, and shape entice you farther down the path. In the afternoon light, the spines take on a magical glow."

Other frequent feathered visitors include roadrunners, which enjoy chasing—and sometimes catching—lizards that dart among the rocks lining the pathways. "There are tons of lizards in the garden," Corman says. "I've seen zebra tails, western whiptails, and spiny lizards; they love the rocks between stones."

Hope's garden has evolved into a refuge for animals and a beautiful sanctuary for humans. From its private seating areas, screened by living ocotillo fences, to its innovative medicine wheel made from local rock, the garden is a place to share a little outdoor bliss. 🌱

See Resources on page 108.



Is Your Backyard Wildlife Friendly?

National Wildlife Federation Backyard Habitat gardens must provide three critical elements to become certified: food, water, and cover. Here's how these elements were accomplished in Hope Dillon's garden.

Food. Quail and small animals can find food using trees such as the blue palo verde, Arizona's state tree, which is covered with screaming-yellow blossoms in the spring. A beanlike fruit, which is eaten by many birds and mammals, follows.

Water. Small faux-rock fountains that seep water provide places for birds to bathe and drink.

Cover! Through selective pruning, thickets of wild vegetation provide homes for many species. Quail enjoy brush raised off the ground for roosting, while lizards hide in the gaps between rocks.

Wildlife of the Southwest



ABOVE: Prairie dogs make good use of the seed pods that fall from leguminous desert trees. **RIGHT:** The javalina, or peccary as it is sometimes known, is a piglike desert rodent that often travels in herds in the arroyo near Hope's desert garden. **BELOW RIGHT:** The Barn Owl is generally nocturnal but it is not uncommon to see this species emerge at dusk or be active at dawn, occasionally being seen in flight in full daylight. **BELOW LEFT:** The Gila Woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*) makes its nest inside the giant saguero cactus or mesquite trees. It's a medium-size woodpecker of the desert regions of the Southwest, including California, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico.

